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SOUTHFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**Testimony to the Michigan House Standing Committee on Education
Fern Katz, Vice President, Southfield Board of Education
Southfield Public Schools
November 2, 2011**

I am very pleased to note that three Michigan School Board members, led by Board member Cassandra Ulbrich, are resisting the push by charter school lobbyists and chartering institutions or authorizers to raise the cap on the number of charter schools in Michigan, and are opposing the supposed school choice bills.

The money follows the child. The State pays a basic allowance for each student in a public school. Every authorizer, such as a university or a school district, gets 3 percent of all of the allowance that comes to their charter schools from the Michigan School Aid Fund to educate our children. The problem is that the authorizers have the sole ability to shut down one of their charter schools that is not performing well. The question we should ask is, will the chartering institution shut down a poorly performing school, or will it keep the school open to maintain the cash flow? Shutting the school almost never happens. If the authorizer shuts down a charter school, then the authorizer will not get the money. Obviously, there is a big conflict of interest here that extends to the management companies. The job of investigating charter schools, approving contracts for charter schools and shutting them down when they do not perform, rightfully belongs to the elected State Board of Education which is charged by the Michigan Constitution to oversee all public education.

State School Board member Eileen Weiser says that when charter schools are compared to traditional schools in their district, then the charter schools perform better. I don't have statistics for the whole state, but that is not true in the Southfield Public School District, where I live, or in other school districts where I have been a visitor. As a matter of fact, I challenge you to do a study in Michigan to see how many students leave charter schools to go to regular public schools on the day after the fourth Friday count. I have yet to meet a Principal or Superintendent who does not complain about the influx of charter school students into the regular public schools on that day. When that happens, the charter schools get the dollars, but the regular public schools do the educating without the state dollars. Regular public schools educate everyone who applies and meets residency

requirements. This transfer of students demonstrates a potential for activity that should be illegal.

Of the 18 charter schools in Oakland County, the Michigan Department of Education has allowed nine of them to open in Southfield. The charters do not and cannot compete with what Southfield has to offer, a 92% African-American community that has a 92% graduation rate, an alternative school that is rated as the best alternative school in the state by the Michigan Association of Alternative Schools. Southfield has International Baccalaureate (IB), University High school, one of 12 NASA labs in the country, academies, etc., etc. Charter schools water down the available resources that are needed for our kind of quality education. And they do that with poor accountability and oversight. Yet there are always parents who will think that charter schools are elite. They are not. They are vehicles through which public funds intended for the education of all are funneled through management companies and authorizers who remove the cream from the top of the state School Aid Fund. The legislature created the situation where nine charter schools can open in Southfield, and the legislature should provide us with some relief from this kind of attack.

Education is a human right. All of our children deserve the best education that we have to offer. To avoid conflicts of interest, contracts with authorizers, supervision of all public education and the right to close poorly performing charter schools rightfully belongs to the elected State Board of Education and with educators.